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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8328
INFO RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 9522

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DEPT. PLEASE PASS TO DRL/IRF FOR AGOMBIS, DRL/NESCA FOR JLIEBERMAN, AND NEA/ARP FOR BMCGRATH.

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2018

TAGS: KIRF PHUM PGOV SA

SUBJECT: SENIOR SAG OFFICIAL ORDERED THE RELEASE OF 16 INDIAN CHRISTIANS ARRESTED IN TA'IF

REF: JEDDAH 185

Classified By: Deputy-Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Ministry of Interior orders release of 16 Indian Christians

¶11. (S) The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission met with Deputy Minister of Interior (MOI) Mohammed bin Naif on April 29, 2008 to discuss the case of the 16 Indian Christians arrested in Ta'if. (reftel) Bin Naif said that the decision to arrest the Indians did not come from MOI in Riyadh or even the Governor's Office in Makkah. In fact, he claimed that "the Makkah Governor was surprised to read about the incident in the local paper." Bin Naif asserted that a low-level police chief in Ta'if decided to target the Indians in cooperation with local mutawwa'in (or religious police). Bin Naif corroborated the Indians' account that local, clean-shaven, plain-clothes MOI officers, not mutawwa'in, lead the raid -- due to an informer's allegation that the Indians were collecting money during their gathering. After an MOI officer drafted his report on the Indians, an elderly, bearded mutawwa entered the apartment, signed the report, and left the apartment. Upon hearing of the arrest, bin Naif ordered his subordinates in Ta'if to release the Indians.

¶12. (S) PolOff spoke with some of the Indians on April 30. They said that the plain-clothes officers asked them about their fundraising efforts, but the questioning focused on their religious practices. The Indians claimed that they began collecting money recently for a local family whose son had passed away. In response, the officers reportedly complimented them on their charitable giving. At the time of the raid, the Indians had raised less than 200 USD.

Indian Christian in Najran Awaits Deportation

¶13. (S) The Ambassador also raised the case of an Indian Christian residing in the Najran province for the past 15 years. The Indian contacted PolOff on April 8 to request the Embassy's assistance. He said that 27 fellow Indian Christians were deported after a private Christian gathering in 2003. Although he also participated in the gathering, he said that his Saudi sponsor intervened on his behalf repeatedly to prevent his deportation. The sponsor told PolOff on April 29 that "twenty days ago" the local passport office began calling him daily to ask him to dismiss his Indian employee immediately on MOI orders. The Indian is scheduled to be deported to India on May 16. The Ambassador passed on the Indian's iqama (residence) number and sponsor's

name to bin Naif, who was unaware of the case, but said he would follow up.

¶4. (S) COMMENT: These two cases are anomalies that do not reflect a nationwide pattern of SAG harassment of Christians. Post recalls that these types of incidents used to be very common, but times have changed in Saudi Arabia. Post has reached out to scores of expatriate Christians in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Qassim, and Najran to gauge their perceptions of religious freedom. They all concur that the situation has improved in the last two to three years, following King Abdullah's ascension to the throne. They cite fewer raids of private gatherings by mutawwa'in and fewer seizures of religious paraphernalia (Bibles, songbooks, and tapes) at airports. However, they remain cautious -- most Christians meet in smaller groups, stagger their meeting times, and use soundproof residences. Their fears that religious freedom could backslide are understandable, as evidenced by these two cases. However, Mohammed bin Nayif's direct intervention in the Ta'if case demonstrates that the SAG is attempting to follow through on its July 2006 commitment to Ambassador Hanford to permit private religious worship and promote religious tolerance. END COMMENT.

FRAKER